A Widow's Resolve

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Aviated Dinosaur

Sing, Melpomene,
Voice of tragic words,
About a widow who accepted her fate
Before her wedding day,
And of her sister ignorant to the widow's resolve.

Overture: Requiem for a Fool

Fool.

That's all I can say about Audrey.
Why is that?
My sister, who prefers the ways of Artemis,
Has been trying for five years
To avert what I resolve to fifteen years ago—
I knew what I accepted to when
I accepted Stephen's hand in marriage.

Stephen:
He was a great merchant,
A great husband,
Thank Hera for fourteen happy years.
A woman when I wedded,
But two years I made him wait to lie in bed with him;
A patient man who waited until I said so.

Outside sensual acts,
He never laid a hand on me
Nor used his words like whips or swords.
He resolve things with me
And not against me.
That man respected my wishes,
And in return, I respected his.
May Hera bless all marriages with bliss and happiness,
Although Hera herself was not blessed with either.

Me and Stephen
Have been blessed with three children,
The youngest our only son—
The only child not blessed to see his father
And Stephen taken away before he could
Placed his son on his knee.
Five years since he passed,
And fifteen since I knew;

A year before I was wedded,
Audrey snuck to a priestess
And wondered if I'll ever marry.
I followed behind her
And regret hearing the priestess' words ever since.

Those words?
If I— Selena— marry,
I rejoin my husband five years
After his funeral.

I knew myself
And chose to marry anyway
(And desired to regardless of fate).
But Audrey?
Such are fools who don't know better,
Thinking we live as long as gods.
It's not even *her* fate she seeks to reverse,
But you think she's trying to change hers.
As for Audrey's fate,
Both she and I are ignorant to that.

As for mine?
The only fate I believe
Is a fate that binds all mortals like me:
We will die one day.
Whether the priestess erred on her vision or not,
I will cross Styx one day,
Ferried by Charon
Into Hades' realm,
Just like every mortal had before me
And every mortal after me.
Even Heracles, now living with the Olympic gods,
Was not immune to this.

There's nothing wrong with striving for a long life,
But Achilles wisely chose a glorious life
Where we sing of his rage
And how Agamemnon dishonored him;
Why would Thetis want to curse him

To a forgotten immortal life—
Immortal in flesh, that is?
Achilles reminds us to live fulfillingly,
Long or short.

Poor Audrey:
It not even *you* that will join Hades today,
Yet I mourn for you and your stupidity.
Even a new husband
Won't change the outcome,
Maybe delay it if one's lucky.

My fate is sealed
Only because I say it's sealed.
I've walked out of the tent fifteen years ago,
And for fifteen years
My sister failed to keep me inside.
When Audrey revealed her motive last night,
She thought I was ignorant to my fate;
She'll never know my secret
And will leave her that way.

Fifteen years I've waited for this day,
A day coming whether I was married
For fourteen years or forty years.
I don't dread today,
Rather, I welcome it like a farmer
Welcomes the booming symphony of Zeus' shield
After a cruel drought massacred his crops,
Rejoiced that his prayers been answered
And his gifts accepted.
The farmer dances in his field,
Drenching himself in the kind rain
Knowing his family,
His community,
His city will no longer go hungry.

My death was gonna come anyway.
Sooner or later.
Anyone wise will know that

They too will join me in Hades one day
And will not waste there time
Dreading about it;
Only fools fear that inevitable moment.

The wise also know not to rush to that day,
To have something to live for
Because often, there's nothing to die for.
Even soldiers charging into battle,
Aware that they might not feel the embrace
Of their partner
Or hear their son's laughter again,
Fight to make sure they never hear that
Their husband has fallen in war.

I guess that makes me a fool, too.

It's time to complete my fate.
This is what I chose to do.
I'll never know if the priestess saw it correctly
Or if she misinterpreted Apollo's words,
But that's something I prefer not to know.

Farewell, Audrey.
Hopefully, your fiery hair will be extinguished
Into a snowy white,
And your youthful skin
Will bear the years of wisdom.
When I hold your hands again,
I hope they're worthy of teaching others,
For time will have taken them away
From shooting arrows.
When we meet again in death,
I hope you can tell me
Many heroic stories of hunting trips,
Thanking Artemis for a splendid boar
Or for aiding you in catching a lovely stag.

I hope you're blessed with many years.
May I wait a lifetime for you.

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A Sister's Duty

So, where do you come from?

I hail from the north region,
Rich in gems and metals.
My father works to extract these precious things
From the Earth's soil,
And sell them to jewelers and blacksmiths,
Lovers of Hephaestus' crafts.

Your father,
Is he successful?

Truthfully,
He isn't what you call "successful",
But he isn't a failure either.
Why?

So I can hear the truth before my father comes home.

That Neil, warming up to Selena.
Doesn't he know her doom?
As her sister, I must stop this,
But how?

You have any sisters?

I have a younger sister named Audrey;
She's still a girl.
If you want her hand in marriage
When she becomes a woman,
Don't try:
She follows Artemis' ways
And hunts instead of marry.

I just wanted to see if you had older sisters.

As for brothers,

Fear not.

Thank the gods.

But I don't know if my father would approve.

Issac would allow you to wed a dog at this point.

So you know my plight?

I thought you had brothers
Chasing away suitors.
Since you have no brothers,
Then it—

Hi Selena,
Hi Neil.

Audrey.

Don't worry,
Just passing through.

So this is the tiny huntress, Selena?

Unfortunately.

And I see another wannabe you're dating.

Now, tiny huntress,
I'm not here for gold.
Only the rich marry for money;
I, Neil, am not rich.

Why not—
Your dad's surrounded by gold.

Not always gold,
Sometimes rubies and diamonds.

You must make a lot of money, huh?

Audrey,
You know Neil's family doesn't have wealth.

Then why, as miners,
Do they remain poor?

We're not exactly poor either, tiny huntress.

Have you thought of *Selena's* motive?

To marry?
Why, for love and children,
A house to tend to in her spare time.

Are you sure she's not after your father's wealth?

If she is,
She'll rue her decision to wed me.

My father wants her to marry into money,
Sparing his grandchildren a hard life of poverty.
I live here with my family,
But I inherit Heather's school and home
When she passes.
While I won't become wealthy,
I won't have to worry about money
For the rest of my life.
Selena has no such guarantees.

Is this true, Selena?

No.

Yes.

Audrey, you brat.

Now that you know my father's motive,
Will you risk her hand in marriage?

...
I have to go.

But Neil—

Sorry,
I have to get ready for work tomorrow.
Mining starts early, y'know.

Neil—

Bye.

But...

See you later, Neil.

...
Audrey...

I was just looking out for you—
He, uh, well...

Well, he's not after our non-existent wealth.
What's wrong with Neil?

Let me think.

Ooh,
Just wait until father finds out
That you drove another suitor away.

What else is new?
He knows I've been looking out for you.

You know father wants me to follow my heart;
He rather me be in rags and happy,
And so do I.

Well,

Neil wasn't good enough.

Neither was Zach or Olivia or Wendy.

I have my reasons.

Audrey!

Hi, dad.

I heard you drove off Neil just now.

How much?

When Selena said to wait until I found out.
Also, I saw Neil leave.

I'm only looking out for her, dad.
Don't you have a hunting trip to prepare for?

Yes, dad.

...

I'm only trying to save my sister.
Why does she desire a domestic life?

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Match-Maker

Hey, Audrey.

Ruby Red—

How's Selena doing?
A widow no more?

No.

You know, I have this novel idea:
Maybe let Selena decide her next spouse.

She did that the last time,
And look what happened—
Stephen went to war
And was slain.

Oh, the nerve of him.

He should've stayed with Selena.

I know the problem with Stephen:
He's vulnerable to spears and arrows.
Wait, I am too.

Knock it off, Ruby Red.

You said they were married for fourteen years,
Fourteen, uh,
What is that beautiful word?

...Happy?

Ding-ding-ding,
Correct—
Fourteen happy years.
Surely, Selena's able to select a husband.

But she refuses to take another.

Is that a problem?

If I don't find her a husband this year,
She'll enter Hades' realm, for sure.

Then find her a wife—
Then, she'll live forever!

Ruby Red,
Selena can't take a wife in the city;
You know that.

How about returning her to *your* homeland?
They allow two wives and two husbands there.
Or maybe the kingdom—
I see the path of immortality, now.

But her children are not citizens there.
They can't vote in my homeland,
Nor can her daughters hold office.

Oh, yeah.

Besides,
Schooling's free *and* great in the city.
All her children can vote and hold office here, as well.
As for the kingdom,
That's a thought.

The recent monarch in power
Isn't a bloodthirsty king
Like his grandfather.
Since his father slayed him,
The kingdom knows nothing but peace (sorta)
And freedom for the people.
Their schools aren't too bad, either.

Come to think of it,
I can't remember anything about Emmanuel's
Grandfather's reign.

Me neither,
Other than what the refuges share,
The one who escaped his evil.
However, I know a lot about Emmanuel's
Father's reign,
From citizens of the kingdom.

You do?

Indeed, I do.

Please tell.

***

The Ballad of Greg (Part One)

Who was the king before Emmanuel?
Why, his name was Greg,
The king who almost wasn't.
A glorious destiny awaited him,
But a few rued the road ahead of him.

Greg's dreaded father—
What a wicked king!
Slaves were the citizens of the kingdom before Greg,
For Victor, the king before Greg,
Saw power as his only being.
Learning from Jason and other heroes of old,
But not of their deeds,
But of the kings they overthrew.
Victor mistaken himself a god—
What a dumb mistake—
And slayed those brave few
Who bravely spoke against his reign;
Even the gods allow people to speak freely.
That vile king has been known
To send armies on crowds he suspected
Were plotting his reign's inevitable end,
And leave the streets stained red.

However, one day, he visited a priest.
Who was this priest?
Why, the bravest man in the world.

Like any king, wise or wicked,
Victor sought Apollo's insight,
And wondered the king,
"Sacred servant of far-shooting Apollo,
"My wife and I— we remain without an heir.
"Hera has not blessed us with healthy sons;
"They die before leaving the womb,
"Or cross the river Styx before they learn to speak.
"Any daughter we wish to marry

“Were killed before their wedding day.
“Clarice weeps for a child,
“And I, my kingdom’s survival;
“Asked the honey-voiced Apollo,
“Knowledgeable of destiny,
“If my kingdom will have an heir.”

After some time,
The priest rejoiced,
“Slaves, slaves your people will be no more:
“A son, *your* son, will reign after you.
“You’ll fall to his sword,
“And this kingdom will be
“Free and prosperous once more.”

“This prophecy, all lies.
“You’re words disloyal to me.”

“Just like Antigone,
“I’m loyal to the deathless gods,
“Your people loyal to them as well.
“Any ruler, king or senator,
“Pledges their loyalty to the immortals ones.
“A king must remember that his loyalty is to the gods.”

“Apollo and you— traitors!”
Wretched Victor pulled out his sword
And thrust it into the priest’s loyal heart,
The priest’s blood flowed from his chest,
A crimson puddle staining Apollo’s temple.
As if the foolish king hadn’t done enough;
He severed the priest’s limbs
And ripped out his throat.

Of course, the priest was no traitor,
And nor was bright Apollo.
The Fatal Archer had witnessed
Victor’s sacrilegious deed,
But couldn’t slay him outright.
His son must slay Victor

And bring prosperity to the kingdom, Apollo thought,
But I know a punishment for him,
Worse than death.

Clarice indeed was pregnant with a son,
But Victor couldn't slay her;
He'd give up his throne
Before anything happened to her,
Nor can he be without her company.
A love for Clarice more than a crown,
She also wasn't banished.

When it was time for Greg's birth,
Eileithyia and Artemis, both childbirth goddesses,
Came to Clarice's side,
And tried to ease her pain.
But, the far-shooting Apollo demanded,
"Leave Clarice be.
"This is a woman Victor loves more than his throne—
"He deserves her no more."

"But, bright Apollo," the virgin twin sister argued,
"Why kill her?
"Is it her fate?"

"She is giving birth to his son—
"A son that will slay his father and free his kingdom.
"His son will live,
"But she must die.
"Victor slayed one of my most loyal priests
"And disgraced me.
"Although he is fated to die by his son's sword,
"Losing Clarice should punish him."

"But why Clarice?" Artemis protested,
"Why not infect his people with plague?
"Why not curse all the mothers in this land
"By having them fall ill,
"Or slay his strongest men?"

“He cares not for his people—
“Only Clarice and his crown.
“Plagues and droughts never swayed his heart.”

“But I love Clarice,
“For she saved her older sister, Ursula, from marriage
“When her father refused to recognize
“Her sacred vows to me.”

“But Victor deserves eternal woe.”

“If you let her die,
“Then both she *and* her son will die.”

Assured her brother,
“Their son will not die with her.
“He will grow strong
“And slay his father;
“Artemis, skilled at the hunt,
“You will not help Clarice until I say.”

“Despicable, monstrous,
“Cruel brother of mine:
“Take your rage out on this kingdom,
“Take it out on me if you must—
“Don’t take it out on Clarice!”

While the siblings quarreled,
Eileithyia helped eased Clarice’s pain;
“The son has been born,”
The midwife goddess announced,
“You need not to fight anymore.”

“Why you...”
The Fatal Archer then pulled out his
Silver bow and arrows,
Slaying Clarice.

“I wouldn’t let Clarice bleed to death,
“Nor risk Victor losing his son.

“He has wept over his lost sons,
“And now he weeps for his wife.
“You could’ve taken Victor’s throne,
“But you instead taken the only one he loves.”

Meanwhile, Victor, seeing his wife lifeless,
Tore his hair and lamented,
“Clarice, my love,
“Sister of Ursula:
“A mother should never outlive her son,
“But should live long enough to see him become a man
“And settle down with a wife.
“She should live long enough to hear
“The laughter of her first grandchild,
“And her second if lucky.”

Poor Clarice,
Outlived all but one of her children,
And couldn’t see Greg become a man.

Victor ordered the midwives
To send the newborn away;
He wanted nothing to do with a wretched baby,
His only sin being born,
Victor’s doom aside.

As for Greg,
The newborn prince,
He knew nothing of his kingdom,
Raised by humble farmers.
He would pray to Demeter
For successful crops,
And was eager to discover her mysteries.
Greg would rejoice the most
When Persephone returned to
The farm-loving goddess,
Growing season for food once more.

Greg lived in this agricultural bliss
Until three years after he became a man;

Iris flew down after a well-needed rain
From kind Zeus after a treacherous drought.
The iridescent goddess asked,
“Greg, don’t you know who you are?”

“Yes,” the prince answered,
“I’m a farmer’s son— a humble one at that.
“I give Demeter gifts in return for a bountiful harvest,
“But lately, she hasn’t blessed my field
“With any crops.
“Instead, she made my field barren.”

“But Greg,” Iris corrected,
“You’re not a farmer’s son—
“You are a prince,
“And you must free them from your blood father.”

“Nonsense,” scoffed Greg,
“I’m no prince.
“You must’ve confused me
“For someone like Perseus.”

“I’m not mistaken—
“Zeus told me to tell you.
“If you don’t believe me,
“Go to your farmer parents,
“For they have proof.
“If you’re still skeptical,
“Go to a priest of Zeus,
“And they’ll tell you what Zeus told me.”

So Greg went to his adopted parents,
Asking about his lineage;
As the winged goddess mentioned,
He was indeed a prince.
“The woman who gave you to us
“Handed us a golden locket
“And instructed,
“‘Give this to him when he becomes a man,
“‘For this is proof of his royalty.

“‘This locket belonged to his mother,
“‘Who won’t see her son become a man.’”

It was then Greg believed
What Iris told him;
His adoptive parents couldn’t afford jewelry.
He now knew he must claim his throne
And free his people.

Now, the destined prince set off for the kingdom,
Wearing the locket around his neck.

He trekked through the mountains;
What vile fiend was there?
Why, the Rocky Wolf—
A giant that sided with the gods
When Gaia sent the giants to fight them,
The Rocky Wolf disobeyed the Earth.
Structured with boulders for his body,
And snow for his fur,
The Rocky Wolf was told by Gaia,
“Climb atop the gods’ celestial realm,
“And have your fiery shriek
“Consume Mt. Olympus.”

That Rocky Wolf chose not to listen,
And wisely sided with the glorious gods,
But Gaia later cursed him with a hatred for the gods,
Forcing Zeus to slay the giant with his lightning bolt;
The Rocky Wolf’s corpse is now the Haunted Peaks.

Then how was the Rocky Wolf a fiend to Greg?
It was his offspring: the Snowy Beast.
A beast your eyes behold—
Swords for claws, and spears for teeth,
The Snowy Beast was born from Rocky Wolf’s
Remaining hatred for the gods.
It delights in slaying travelers every winter,
Shredding their stomachs and hearts
With its starving teeth,

Flooding it mouth in traveler's blood,
Painting its teeth with it as well.

How did the prince,
Skilled not in slaying beasts,
Let alone fighting,
Overcome and slew the Snowy Beast?
Why, with Athena's help.

Taking pity on Greg,
She came to his side, invisible,
And realized,
"You must be Greg,
"Destined to free his kingdom."

"I used to be a farmer," admitted Greg,
"But my adoptive parents and Iris said I'm a prince.
"Here," he should the gray-eyed goddess his locket,
"Proof of my royal blood."

"Then why do you hide behind the boulder
"Instead of trying to slay the Snowy Beast?"

"I'm not Heracles, a lionhearted god,
"Nor am I Perseus, slayer of the Gorgon."

"We helped those heroes on their paths,"
Athena, protector of heroes, reminded.
"Hear my words:
"We're behind a bone of Rocky Wolf,
"Capable of crushing man and beast.
"The Snowy Beast sleeps below this cliff
"Because the Rocky Wolf's presence is strongest here.
"When the Snowy Beast appears
"And enters its slumber for the day,
"We'll push the boulder on the beast's skull."

"But it's a heavy stone;
"I'm not strong enough to help you."

“You underestimate your strength,
“Now do as I say.
“You need not to worry about my strength—
“Even Aphrodite is as strong as a thousand men.”

When the Snowy Beast arrived in its resting ground,
And closed its eyes,
Letting Sleep overcome it,
Athena gave the signal,
And Greg and the owl-eyed goddess
Pushed the boulder over the cliff.
The boulder fell from the cliff;
As Athena had told the prince,
Rocky Wolf’s bone smashed the beast’s skull,
Now replaced by the boulder,
Throned on the beast’s bloody remains.

“I must leave now,” Athena spoke.

“Thank you.” Greg bowed to the war goddess,
“I’ll give you splendid gifts
“Once I liberate my kingdom.”

***

Helena?
Helena!

Audrey, what do you want?

I don't want to marry.

Thinking of marriage at *your* age?
You're just a girl.
You'll change your mind, soon.

No, I won't.
I want to live free and among the woods
Like Artemis and her hunting party,
Howling the hunter's cry
And enjoying the hunter's thrill.
I want to chase down stags
And slay vicious boars,
Running through the blessed forest.

Are you sure you want to live
The life of the hunter?

Yes.
If I don't, I'll be surely wedded,
Condemned to a domestic life.

Now what makes you think you'll—
I want to remain pure.
I never want to lie in bed with *anyone*.
I want a life of freedom.

But Audrey,
You're too young to decide this.
Maybe when you're a woman,
You'll desire a husband and children.
If not a husband, then a wife.

But I desire none of those.
I desire the wilderness,
The way of Artemis.
I prefer bows and arrows,
Hunting wild beasts
And winning their hide and meat.
I want to give the Great Huntress
Splendid gifts as gratitude.
Oh, how I envy her immunity
To Aphrodite.

But Athena and Hestia are also immune to Aphrodite.
Hestia, the keeper of the hearth,
Tends to the everlasting flame on Olympus.
Athena, who is skilled in the arts of war,
Also is skilled in the arts of weaving
And pottery.

You're not listening to me.

Audrey, I'm sure if you wait 'till you're older,
You'll surely would rather—

I want to remain a virgin!

...
But, Audrey...

...I'm old enough to decide this.
I'm taking a vow of chastity.
I want to live the life of a hunter.
Free from a married life.

...If you insist.

...

Now, that you have sworn your vows,
Is there anything else you request?

Yes.
My sister, Selena,
Desires a domestic life.
She wants to marry and have many children.
Since I'm here,
May I ask you a favor?

Anything.

Selena has been longing for a husband or a wife,
And I would like to know if she'll get her wish.
Ask Apollo if my sister will have a domestic life.

Do you have the offerings?

(*nods*)

Apollo, fatal archer,
Far-shooting son of noble Leto and mighty Zeus:
You taught man how to interpret your prophesies
And reveal our fates.
Bright Apollo,
May your beautiful voice give us guidance
Through this world.
A young girl ask you on behalf
Of her older sister, Selena;
Selena longs for a domestic life,
The joys of crafts and motherhood.
Oh, Apollo— with your flawless voice—
Will she marry, a home to keep?

...

(*GASP*)

What?

Audrey, are you *sure* you want to know?

Yes.
I would like to know.
Will my sister be happy,
Or is she doomed a maiden?

I really think you—

Tell me, now!

Okay.

...
So?
Will she be happy?
Will she not?
Is she better off a maiden
Or a wife?

If she desires a spouse,
She will have one.

That's all?
That doesn't sound bad.

However,
If she takes a husband,
Five years after his funeral
She will follow him.

How about a wife?
Apollo didn't tell me that.

Why not?
Is this path the same with a wife?

Maybe,
But maybe as well,
Selena will not want a wife.

I don't know—

She did date a wealthy girl,
About as old as Selena.
Her family moved yesterday to the kingdom
For better schools.
Oh, how her parents wouldn't approve
Of wealthy ones wedding the poor.

You're lucky you and Selena are taught school
By your mentor, Heather.
Your mother can read,
And has taught you to read and write.
You and Selena are much luckier than most poor here.

Yes,
And I thank the gods everyday
For giving us a literate mother
And a generous mentor,
Willing to give us schooling for free.

Your father,
Can he read?

Unfortunately, no.
He sells hides,
But has no time for school.
None of his family had.

But your mother,
I remember,
I was a young woman still training as a priestess.
She came from a well-off family,
Neither wealthy or poor.
She followed her heart
And chose your father.
She knew it would be better penniless yet happy
Than to be wealthy yet miserable.
Let's hope your sister follows her heart,
Decides to marry with love.

But if she marries,

She's doomed.

She's only doomed
If her marriage is unloved.
She's also doomed if she's not allowed
To be happy.

But—

Audrey,
Let Selena be happy.
If she desires a wife,
Let her have one.

I hope she desires a wife.

But if she desires a husband,
Let her have him, too.

...Okay.

Anything else?
Would you like to ask Apollo about *your* destiny?

No, thank you.
I'd like to remain clueless to mine.

Very well.

I'll be going.
Heather and mother must be worried.

I'll come with you—
I need to tell your parents about your oath.

...
Helena?

Yes?
Please don't tell Selena about her fate.

I don’t want this to sway her away from happiness;
Likewise, I won’t tell her.

I promise.

***

Audrey.

Huh?

You missed the rest of the story.

Sorry, Ruby Red.
Please continue telling;
I'm listening.

Too late—
We're at your sister's home.
Maybe next time.

...
Hello, Audrey.

Hi, Selena.

Oh, Ruby Red,
What a surprise.

May I come in, too?

(*nods*)

...
Wow—
This is the best deer meat I've ever tasted.
You really know how to work with Audrey's catch.

C'mon,
You always say that about my meals,
Whether it's fish or wild beasts.

You have all the fancy spices and stuff;
If I had all the fancy spices,

I would give some to the gods everyday,
Then use it on my food.

So, what's new?

Well, I've got an angle on what to do
For the Great Dionysia:
A tragic play on Victor.

I was asking Audrey.

Me?

Yes—
What's new in our homeland?

A great famine struck one of the regions.
Someone must've angered Demeter or something.

In *our* region?

No, no,
The one out west.

Have you asked Helena about it?

She said Apollo sent it.

Why?

I don't know;
She didn't tell me.
I'm guessing the representative there must be
Harboring a killer or something.

Emily?
Oh, that bitch—
What fools her region is.

Forgive me, you two,

But I lived in the city, remember?
What's wrong with this Emily fellow?

Only that she woos her voters
With gifts and gold.

Selena, her helpers are bribed with gifts and gold;
Her *voters* are wooed with promises,
Like all politicians do.

Audrey,
You know what she does with her seat:
She robs from the taxes the rich pay
And fund her lavish wishes
Instead of temples and theaters.
Emily gives the money to her friends
Instead of the symposia
Where poets and philosophers sing
New ideas and heroic tales.

I've seen her at the symposium our dad used to go to
Every once in a while.
Emily indulged in too much wine,
Forgot to give some to the gods.

Wait—
The gods are the first one you give wine too.

Exactly.
Wine makes the greatest truth serum.
She boasted about helping out a friend,
Saying she owed him a favor.
I'm guessing whatever he did
Must've angered the Fatal Archer.

Audrey, Selena—
What's wrong with your way of voting
Is that your people vote on who votes for you.
You should have all citizens vote directly
On leaders and laws.

But, the city has senators, Ruby Red.

Yeah,
They draft laws and bring them
For the people to vote on.
Then, they make sure that the laws are enforced.
All the senators vote on are officers and generals.

Ruby Red,
Our homeland's too big for all the citizens
To vote on laws directly.

Well, that's no excuse, Selena.
Unlike your homeland,
Where men and women have always vote,
But only let the women run for office,
The city used to not let women into politics at all.

Really,
There *was* a time like that?
Oh, how shocking.

No one in the city remembers
When women couldn't be politicians,
Let alone cast a lovely stone,
Polished in black onyx
And sparkly opal swirling like the river.

***

One day,
A senator went to a priestess;
"I desire my seat," he begged,
"How do I keep it?"
The priestess,
Servant to Athena, protector of civil matters,
Revealed,
"Let the women be like men."

What a thought:
Let women in wars,
Let them vote in the city square,

Let them do a *man's* duty?

One day,
The senate brought a law to the floor.
This law would let women run for office and senate,
And let them vote, too.

That's when it occurred:
This would let women be like men.

So, the senator campaigned throughout the city;
"Let the women enter the senate,
"Let them enter the polls.
"With their voices heard,
"They will better our homes and a woman's duty."

"But if they abandon the homes for the senate,"
The husbands worried,
"Who will take care of the cooking and cleaning,
"Tending to the fire?
"Who would make clothes for our backs,
"And help raise our children?"

"They won't abandon their homes while in office—
"They'll serve their city and their homes at once.
"We men have done both tend the home and the city
"Before we get married,
"So why can't women do the same,
"Married or not?
"Why do you think wise Athena protects
"Our city and soldiers,
"And taught us domestic arts
"Like pottery and weaving?"

"He's right," one husband mentioned,
"Athena is skilled at war and crafts,
"She protects the cities,
"And she protects domestic tasks."

***

Ruby Red,

Hestia protects the home, remember?

Oh, I forgot,
But Athena *did* teach humanity
Weaving and pottery, right?
Those are used at home.

But without Hestia,
There wouldn't be homes to use them in.

Oh, Audrey,
The craftsmen gods,
Athena and Hephaestus,
Divided their skills:
Athena used her crafting skills to benefit the home
While Hephaestus uses his skills to benefit the cities.
"I already guard the cities from outside harms
"And with Father Zeus,
"I keep civics in order,
"Governments running.
"I'm also skilled in war.
"It's only fair for your crafts
"To help the cities I protect."

Interesting,
But Athena still reigns over innovation, you know.
She also invented chariots, carts, plows,
Ships, and the aulos:
All used outside the home and benefit the city.
Surely, her crafting skills
Are not restrained to domestic chores;
Also, Hephaestus protects carpenters,
Their skills are used to build chairs we sit on,
Tables we feast on,
And beds we sleep on—
All domestic objects.
The craftsmen deities
Use their skills for the city and home *together*
And not separately.

Uh...
But indeed,
Hestia protects the home,
The hearth that warms our homes
And cook our foods,
As well as community as a whole.
Without the home,
We wouldn't have communities.
She tends to the flames on Mt. Olympus,
The most respected of all the gods—
She gets twice the offerings from us,
Getting more than even Zeus.

I guess that's what happens
When you swear on your brother's head.

Ruby Red,
Audrey was updating me on our homeland.

It's alright, Selena.
It would be boring without other tales to share.

Like what tales, Audrey?

You know tales?

Do I?

***

Tomata

Sing, Erato,
The heartbreaking tale
Between two mortals—
One in love and one oblivious,
And the goddess ruling over this powerful force.

The tomato:
Blood red flesh
With yellow and orange cousins.
Its scent perfumed in Gaia's earthly kiss,
Its juices pulsing with rustic sweetness.

Laughter-loving Aphrodite brought this fruit
To mortals when a lonely shepherd died
From a one-sided suffering.

Who was this love-swept shepherd?
Tomata, the fruit's namesake,
Son of a humble shepherd and his wife,
Was guarding his sheep one day
When his eyes caught Gilbert.

Oh, what Herculean muscles,
A mature, curly black beard to match.
His eyes, though deep brown,
Are an ocean of wonder.
Such tired hands—
Calloused from fire and metal
Being hammered and manipulated all day,
A gentle giant, those hands are,
As too the owner;
Gilbert's ebony dark skin only makes him lovelier still.
With a beaming smile and a hearty laugh,
The blacksmith makes women and men swoon alike.

Hailing from a mother from exotic lands—
A princess destined to marry a man

With many jewels and precious metals—
And a local blacksmith father
Trained by Hephaestus himself,
Any metric such as Tomata
Would be lucky to have him.

"How often do you come down this path?"
Asked Tomata.

"Everyday from the mine to my shop,"
Gleefully boomed the blacksmith.

Poor Tomata,
Shy as a young lamb,
Couldn't sway Gilbert's heart,
Flowers and love songs crumble to dust.

"Oh, golden Aphrodite who lives on Mount Olympus,"
The shepherd begged everyday
In various forms,
"Eros struck me with his arrows,
"And now I love a man
"Swayed not by my cries.
"Please, help me win his heart."

Such prayers moved Aphrodite's heart
To not pursue Tomata's love herself;
Oh, beautiful Tomata,
I can't bring myself to give you to me,
But I can't surrender you to Gilbert.

But what did *Eros* do?
Torn between his mother's desire
And the shepherd's pining,
The winged god of love couldn't bear it no longer.
A god has many lifetimes for love,
But a mortal has but a moment.

One Aphrodisia, when we celebrate
The golden goddess of love

And her power over gods and men
(With a certain three goddesses immune),
Gilbert entered the region's town hall
Where Eros assured,
"Your true love has come.
"When he appears,
"I'll make sure you two are together."

An ache pierced the blacksmith's heart;
It's he—
The shepherd, Tomata.
A little scrawny figure,
But freckle constellations adore his face and arms;
His hair is as dark as the Night.
With the bluest eyes one can ever behold,
One swims in those eyes just looking at them.

"Oh, dear shepherd," Gilbert clasped his strong hands
To Tomata's small yet calloused hands,
"Eros promised a soulmate to me,
"And what a promise he fulfilled."

"But Gilbert," the meek shepherd squeaked,
"I'm not worthy for you:
"My father's just a humble shepherd like me,
"And my mother comes from beggars.
"Your father was trained by Hephaestus
"In the way of metalwork;
"Your mother used to be a princess."

"It matters not who we hail from."

Laughter-loving Aphrodite
Gazed at this "appalling" scene—
How dare her son give Tomata to *Gilbert*
And not her.

"You betrayed me, my winged son,"
The distraught goddess wept,
"How could you?"

“Mortals only live for so long,” Eros reasoned,
“They only have so many opportunities for love.”

“But I love Tomata so;
“He could’ve been with me.”

“But then he dies—
“Now who would you love?
“You have eternity to find love again.”

This didn’t fix the goddess’ broken heart.

What did golden Aphrodite do about it?
Every prayer the couple gave thanking her
And her son for uniting them together
Tortured the goddess so;
Why can’t I bring myself to take you away
From Gilbert, Tomata?

It’s a day before the couple’s wedding day.
A common concept of two people
Of the same sex wedded
Was then foreign to the region,
A possibility allowed five years ago,
When one of Hera’s priestesses
Dreamed of the Queen musing,
“Mortals know that men can marry women,
“But do they know that men can wed men,
“And women can wed women?”

Such a vision that allowed Tomata and Gilbert to wed.

But did such sacred union happen?
If I can’t take Tomata from Gilbert,
I shall take Gilbert away from Tomata.

So the golden Aphrodite rushed to the blacksmith,
Who was going to Tomata’s father for dowry,
Then made him fall in love with a handsome merchant

Happening to pass by.

He should be back by now, the shepherd wondered.
I should search for him.

What betrayal befell before him:
Gilbert singing love songs to another man,
Caressing his braided hair ever so softly
With his strong fingers.

Running from this sight,
Tomata entered Aphrodite's altar;
"Oh, cruel Aphrodite,
"Wicked goddess,
"What a bane love is to men!
"Why did you tear Gilbert away from me,
"Into the arms of a treacherous merchant?"

Swiping the sacred knife from the altar,
He vowed,
"From this day forward,
"I shall never love another human being again."

Then, placing it to his throat,
The heart-shattered shepherd sliced his throat open
Like a priest sacrificing a bull to a god.
Making his way to the altar,
The priest hauls the bull to the altar,
Prays while holding the blade to its neck.
Then, once finished with prayer,
He slits the bull's muscular throat,
Spilling a crimson river,
Draining onto the altar.

The love goddess held the lifeless Tomata in her arms,
"What have I done—
"I drove him to his grave.
"Oh, foolish shepherd,
"What a thing to die for.
"Love's something mortals look forward to,

“Even if it’s not between lovers.”

Thus, she turned the shepherd into a tomato,
Coloring it with his blood.
“Any young lover will be lucky to have you now,
“For any youth who gives this fruit to their lover
“And eats it raw on its own
“Will be blessed with love forever.”

Now, in the region where women rule,
They remember the goddess’ grief
Every year before the summer starts,
Reenacting the scene with a male youth
Sacrificing a white dove to Aphrodite
To bless all youth with true love,
And old hearts would remember their youth,
Telling tales of winning and losing hearts.

It’s custom for the youth to gift tomato baskets
To beautiful sweethearts foolishly in love,
But if the tomato you receive is green,
Then lovers you are no more.

***

Why Bluebirds?

The bluebird,
A once abundant bird in the city walls.
Sent by Hera
After a priestess of hers begged for forgiveness
For her cheating ways.

Who was this priestess?
Her name's Sara,
A woman devoted to Hera since girlhood.
All she's known were blessed marriages—
Sara's parents (named Harold and Patricia)
Have loved each other so,
Using their parents as role models
On a true union.

Sara's grandparents, though,
Saw her parents' union like vile,
Disgusted at this harmless union;
Why marry such a poor man,
Guarding the city gates by day
And plays the lyre at night?

Tolerating this union no more,
Patricia's mother challenged,
"So you think you're so faithful,
"A rich woman and a poor man.
"You slept with no one but each other;
"You enjoy no other company.
"But when you separate for the day,
"Are you certain of each other?"

"Even though Patricia goes to marketplaces,
"Searching for lovely furs to tan,
"Transforming them into extravagant coats and hats,"
Harold replied,
"I know she longs for my company
"More than the open road.

“She thanks Hermes and Hecate
“For guiding her travels,
“Then dashes into my arms.”

“Then you and my daughter shall prove it.”

What was this challenge?
Patricia’s mother sent Harold and Patricia
To places known for lovely people,
Patricia surrounded by young men,
And Harold by young women.

Lustful desires all over the place,
Dishonest spouses giving in to temptation.
Some spouses forget their love ones there,
Lying in a young lover’s bed.
When their spouse finds out,
Oh, divorce’s a lenient punishment from them.

Harold and Patricia though,
Both prayed to Hera,
“Hera, the most faithful of spouses,
“You know the pains of a fickle husband,
“Yet remain by his side.
“Help us remain true to each other,
“So we may not realize that woe.”

When they returned to Patricia’s mother,
She proclaimed,
“Hera, who blesses marriages,
“Show me a sign of this couple’s faith.”

So Hera sent a white feather,
But from what bird is not known.
Patricia’s father, skilled in reading the signs of birds,
Announced,
“Fear not, my love,
“For the couple has remained true.”

Thus, the faithful parents of Sara.

Sara, oblivious to broken marriages,
Sought a husband the minute she was able,
Ignoring the lesson of her aunt,
Who tried to tell her,
"Be careful of who you marry,
"For I married too quickly.
"Now, I remain miserable
"While my husbands lies with younger maidens."

Who was this unfortunate man
That married Sara?
He was a sailor,
A fisherman, too.
An honest man to his previous wife;
But alas, childless their marriage went,
So his first wife tossed herself into the sea,
Ashamed of her barren fields.

The priestess then wedded the fisherman,
Then proceeded to devote herself to Hera.

As the years went by,
So too did the fisherman's youth.
Passing down his sailing ways to his nephew,
He desired living inland now,
Spending time with his wife.
However, Sara desired more youthful men.
When the fisherman got older,
But stilled sailed the seas,
Sara would sneak off to a lover's home,
Wooing him with love poems
And spending passionate evenings together.

Hera's priestess,
Unfaithful to her spouse.
You know how Hera would feel about that.

What happened when Sara's husband found out?
He took a rope and fled to the forest,

Disgraced that his wife fell out of love with him.
"May my wife feel Hera's wrath
"As if Sara slept with Zeus," cursed the fisherman.

Normally, Hera doesn't directly punish cheaters,
As guilt and shame would often punish them,
Or divorce if the spouses desire,
Even the cheater feeling a knife's agonizing grab
From their spouse,
But this was a priestess devoted to her.
You betrayed your husband,
And doubled betrayed me.

When Sara entered the temple,
The goddess appeared to her;
"You violated your wedding vows,
"Disrespecting me.
"You deserve to be as fickle as a bluebird."

Then, the priestess' fingers lengthen,
Grotesquely fusing together.
Her arms bent downward;
Her nose and mouth mushed into each other,
Curving and slightly elongating from her face.
The priestess' once lovely legs turned scrawny,
Her toes merging, then growing into four,
Her legs painted dark.
Light brown feathers sprouted from her
Once flawless skin,
Only leaving some blue at the edge of the wings.
Her once amber eyes tuned into a beady black,
And she shrunk into a tiny creature.
Her voice, once singing hymns to the Queen,
Now only chirps remorseful tunes.

You then wonder,
"Why would Hera turn the priestess
"Into a faithful bluebird?"
Infidel people like moving from woman to woman,
Man to man.

A bluebird chooses one mate forever,
Something fickle partners can't stand.

Beware, newlyweds,
For these loyal birds spell doom for you
If it visits during you wedding day,
Lest it lies dead when you see it.

***

For Her Own Good

Stephen:
How ignorant can you be?
You've doomed my sister into a fatal marriage,
Don't drag her down with you.

You stole Selena away from life,
Your selfish love killed her.
You say she's not dead,
You say she's not doomed,
But five years after you join Hades,
You'll regret your lustful bonds.

Look at her—
Oblivious to Apollo's words.
I wished she was there,
Absorbing every word into her mind.
Selena then would wisely choose
To remain a maiden forever,
Freeing herself from a grim demise.

How could you take my sister away,
You dumb merchant?
She laughs and enjoys your company now;
She'll dread you after Charon ferries you into Hades.

But, you *do* treat Selena well,
Using your hands to hold her gently
And not as weapons to paint her skin black and blue.
You use your words as herbs to heal her pain
And nourish her sunny grin,
And not as stones to break her soul.
You never forced her into your bed,
Instead wait for her to get in.

Selena, as well, treats you kindly too.
She uses her hands to hold you gently as well,
Taking out her frustrations on bread dough

Instead of you.
She uses her soothing voice to love and heal you, too.
Selena made you wait until she was ready,
And she never forced you into your bed, either.

You two are wine to a cup,
Poetry to song,
Dance to festivals.
You're Penelope to her Odysseus,
Achilles to his Patroclus,
So many unions I know.

You're inseparable like pieces of metal bond with fire
By the industrious blacksmith.
Taught in the ways of Hephaestus,
The blacksmith wields his iron tongs,
Lifting the metals into the fire.
Heated, the metal melts,
Clinging onto the other metal so that
They not melt away together.
Once bonded, the blacksmith
Carries them to the anvil,
Shaping their bond with his hammer.

Like the blacksmith,
You and Selena build your bond,
But unlike the blacksmith,
You don't build it by force.

You two are meant together,
So my venom will hurt me
As well as you.

This is only for your own good, Selena;
Forgive me for what I must do.

***

What did Audrey do with this “venom”?
Well, she poisoned everyone in town.

“Did you hear,” the huntress whispered
To hungry gossips,
“Stephen longs for women.”

“But he has one,” the gossips corrected.

“He wants more children,
“And my poor sister’s getting more barren,
“Her fields less nourished over the years.”

“They already have two.”

“Yes, but all are daughters
“Who can’t inherit his business.”

“They can so,” reminded the gossips.

“However,” Audrey cleared her throat,
“Stephen longs for a son.
“Since my sister has produce none,
“He’s looking for a woman to give him one.”

Audrey traveled over the city;
“Stephen looks for fertile fields—
“His wife’s getting older,
“And he’s also getting bored.”

She even tried to envenom her sister
With piercing fangs.
“What’s new?”

“There have been talks that Stephen has
“Been disloyal to me.
“By Hera, I know these rumors aren’t true.”

“Do you know where your husband is?”

“Right now, he’s on his way back home.
“He goes to our homeland a few times a year
“To sell pots and weaves I’ve made,
“Along with other items.”

“How do you know Stephen
“Doesn’t have maidens there?
“He sneaks off for a bit from his wife,
“Then have passionate evenings
“With younger women.”

“Lies—
“Stephen never lain with other women,
“Even when he wanted to.
“His love for me has conquered his lust.
“I know I’m not a youthful flower anymore,
“But Stephen loves me too much to notice.”

“Then ask Hera on Stephen’s faith:
“Go to the city’s fountain
“While the sun goes down.
“Ask her if Stephen remains loyal to you.
“If a bluebird flies by,
“Then Stephen has indeed betrayed you;
“If a white dove flies,
“Then Stephen has remained true.”

One problem:
Bluebirds live everywhere in the city.

So Hera, the Queen of the gods,
Who knows Stephen loves no woman but Selena,
Rushed to the fountain before sundown,
And turned all the bluebirds into doves;
I won’t let Selena fall victim to slander.

Then what happened?

“Audrey, Audrey,” Selena hurried home,
An ocean-wide smile beaming across her face.
“Hera sent me good news:
“Stephen has remained true.”

Impossible, Audrey, who prefers the ways of Artemis,
Wondered,
Doves don’t live in the city.
How could this be?

“Why did I ever doubt you, Stephen?” Selena asked,
Running to her faithful husband.

“Doubt me?” Stephen’s smile
Disappeared from his face.
“When?”

“Oh, all the townspeople claimed
“You desired younger women,
“For I haven’t bear you any sons.
“Afraid, I went to the fountain for a sign from Hera.
“They’re white doves;
“Oh, I knew you wouldn’t let me down.”

“Who would spread such hideous slander?”

The couple turned to Audrey,
Who was shocked that Hera found the antidote.

“I must go,” she nervously mentioned,
“I have a hunting trip, tomorrow.”

“Audrey,” her sister growled.

“See you.”

“Get back here, you marriage-hating brat!”

***

Clarice

My mother would always compare
Audrey and I to Clarice and Ursula—
Two sisters from my homeland.

Why, Selena?

One was married, one remained a virgin.
That's all we have to share.

C'mon,
There has to be more than that.

There's not:
You see, Clarice and Ursula came from wealth,
While I came from poverty.
Our parents' respected Audrey's vows.

Why wouldn't they?
Artemis *and* Audrey would kill them if they didn't.

Remember their father?

Yeah,
That bastard desired many grandsons
And thought the older Ursula would provide them.
He wanted to wed her to Victor.
But Ursula devoted herself to Artemis,
And became one of her most loyal priestesses.
That didn't sway her father.
"You're young,
"A fertile field.
"Throw away this silly desire
"To Artemis," he demanded.

But she didn't though:
Clarice overheard her father's words,
And rushed to Artemis' temple.

She cried, “Artemis, eternal virgin,
“Sacred goddess of the hunt.
“My sister, Ursula,
“Has devoted herself to you;
“Alas, my father scoffs at you,
“Disregarding her vows.
“Save my sister from my father,
“And I’m willing to take her place.”
The Great Huntress, while not a marriage goddess,
Admired Clarice’s respect for her, her sister,
And her sister’s vows.

I heard she worked with Hera to save Ursula
From marriage.

Odd—
I thought she was jealous of Leto
And her children.

I think Leto had them before Zeus wedded Hera.

Is that so?

We can discuss Zeus’ lovers all day.

Yes, we could.
Anyway, about Clarice...

***

You see, Artemis begged for Hera’s help
Since marriage isn’t her domain.

“But Clarice knows what happens if she weds,”
The Blesser of Marriages mentioned.

“She does?”

“Her sons will die before they’re weaned,
“And her daughters will die before they wed.”
Poor Hera did not have the heart to tell Artemis
The rest of Clarice’s doom:

Clarice will have a healthy son
Ten years after her wedding day,
But won't be with him after his birth.

"And she *still* wants to take her place.
"Please, help me save Ursula from her father."

"Her father?"
That man, unfaithful to his wife.
I know how that feels,
For I too am married to and unfaithful man.
But Ursula's father goes beyond unfaithful—
He tries to get as many wives at once.

Thus, the Queen of the gods agreed to help.

***

Interesting, Ruby Red.

Well, it *has* been a while
Since Leto had Apollo and Artemis.

You see,
They disguised the sisters as each other.

Sneaky.

So, their father gave Clarice away instead of Ursula,
And Ursula went on to be
One of Artemis' devoted priestesses.
The sisters' were revealed
After Clarice entered the kingdom;
Good for Victor—
He wanted Clarice as a wife anyway.
And Artemis told Ursula to enter the forest
And build a shrine devoted to her.

You forgot about Clarice's reward.

Audrey,
What are you doing here?

Just returned from a hunt.
Now why are you guys talking about
Clarice and Ursula?

Just ‘cause.

Ruby Red,
About Clarice’s reward.

Yeah, Audrey—
We were just getting to that part.
But you interrupted us,
So *you* have to tell the rest of the story.

Alright:
For her respect for Artemis,
The goddess blessed Clarice
With the best hunters for her kingdom.
For Ursula’s devotion,
She gave the priestess a bow and arrow
As accurate as the goddess’ bow and arrows.
“I’ll also bless you with students
“To pass down your hunting skills too,”
Artemis proclaimed,
“And the students will then become teachers,
“Passing their skills down to their students,
“And they all will make you proud.”

***

Selena and Stephen

A woman with hair long and golden
Like the wheat Demeter blessed us with
To reap and grind into flour,
Becoming bread— food for our families.
Alas, such locks will too grind to flour over time,
But her Selena, named after the Moon,
Will not be blessed to see this day.

Why, a woman with eyes colored in rich soil,
Her husband, a wealthy merchant,
Taught by Hermes in the skills of salesmen
The quick-witted god also his father;
What's his name though?
Stephen, a son of the swift-footed Hermes
And his mistress, a shepherd's wife.

He laid with her, thus resulting in Stephen's birth.
The shepherd caught the god and his wife,
But before the shepherd could rip his wife
From Hermes' arms
And cut her throat open like an animal
Being offered as sacrifice,
The silver-tongued Hermes deceived the shepherd
By telling him that the shepherd himself
Slept with his wife.
Oh, that gullible shepherd,
Took his word,
And apologized to the god.

That shepherd would have placed
Stephen on his knee
Like he did with his own sons,
But words of a priest spoken long ago,
When he wanted to know if he can
Pass down his shepherd skills,
Echoed in his mind:
The shepherd— named Brandon mind you—

Will marry and have ten sons,
But his wife will die by their tenth son's hand.

Foolish shepherd—
He left Stephen out to die!
Hermes saw his son abandoned,
And decided to raise him.
Offended, the swift god struck Brandon's sheep mad;
How dare he exposes the god's son to die.

These mad sheep thought Brandon was grass
And tore into his flesh,
Until nothing but his bones remain.
Of course, this happened after his wife bore
Their tenth son
Who Brandon thought was his eleventh.

Thus, the god taught Stephen the ways of a merchant,
How to use words to sell products,
And how to make a profit on every sale.
As a result, Stephen became wealthy.
But unlike the foolish Arachne,
Whose blasphemous boasting
Angered the gray-eyed Athena,
He praised Hermes every day,
Always praying to him to keep his business successful,
Knowing the god taught him the way of a salesman.

Stephen, wealthy son of Hermes,
Was Selena's husband.
Unlike her sister Audrey—
Who preferred the way of Artemis—
Selena liked more domestic tasks
Such as crafts and cooking.

That, and her beauty would make her a perfect wife,
Such so that when Stephen was on his way
To her city's marketplace
(He would go there a few times a year),
He asked her the way to her father's home

When he caught glimpse of Selena's beauty,
Selena cleaning the laundry at the river at the time.

When he arrived at her father's home,
Her father gave Stephen some wine
And food from the supper his wife made.
After Stephen had his fill,
Selena's father asked, "Who are you?
"Where have you come from?"

"My name is Stephen," the merchant responded,
"I'm a son of silver-tongued Hermes,
"Taught by him the way of the salesman.
"He blesses me with good business,
"And I pray to him to keep my business successful.
"On my the way to the market,
"I caught a glimpse of your daughter.
"I'm looking to settle down,
"And maybe have a son to pass my business down to;
"Hopefully, he'll be blessed by Hermes
"As he has blessed me.
"I want to marry your daughter, Selena."

Selena's father agreed,
But then mentioned, "Her sister will surely object.
"We must wed you to at soon as possible,
"Or Audrey will rid of you.
"Fortunately, she's on a hunting trip
"With her mentor for a month.
"She follows the way of Artemis
"And vowed to her a vow of chastity.
"Audrey can't marry,
"But she forgets Selena is allowed to take a husband."

Then, what happened to him?
Stephen, blessed by Hermes with salesman's skills,
Took up arms when his homeland declared war;
The only battle at that wretched river.
Athena favors the brave and wise,
But foolish Stephen was not blessed

With the skills of war.

The gray-eyed goddess
Holds Stephen's homeland dear,
A land willing to solve conflicts with words,
A common, yet powerful weapon,
Stronger than any bronze sword,
Before solving them with spears.
She, the one skilled in the arts of war,
Whispered in the general's ear
How to protect the land's river,
For the river god allows the people
From the land to fill their jars from the fountains
In which he fills with pristine waters.

The owl-eyed Athena bespoke,
"Let the enemy throw the first spear:
"The river god loathes the hounds of war.
"Make sure the spear misses your soldiers;
"If it hits, make sure the soldier falls in the water.
"The river god will know
"The enemy disturbed his peaceful waters,
"And will let *your* army cross safely."

"But my lady," the general worried,
"What if the enemy decides
"To strike with arrows first?"

"Don't worry.
"Leave that to me."

Athena then crossed over the river,
Unseen by both sides,
And told the enemy general (who is Greg),
Disguised as one of his soldiers,
"Sir, Athena,
"Skilled in the arts of war,
"Told me to share you this:
"Throw your spear into the river.
"The river god loathes the hounds of war,

“And throwing the spear in the water
“Will make him think
“The other side threw the spear first,
“And will let you cross the river safely.”

“Why not an arrow?” the enemy general scoffed,
“What happens if I hit one of the enemy's soldiers?”

“Don’t,” said the goddess,
“Or else the river god will know it’s you,
“And let the other side cross safely.”

“Nonsense,” boasted Greg,
“Athena would never come up
“With something like that,”
But before he could shoot his arrow,
Athena ripped the spear from him
And stabbed the river.

As Athena told the general protecting her land,
The war-hating river god felt a searing gouge
Through his skin,
Seeing the spear and believed
It was the enemy army that
Disturbed his peaceful waters.
And, as the war goddess promised,
He let the goddess’ favored army pass safely
And led them to victory.

What about that stupid Greg,
Thinking he knew more than the gray-eyed Athena?
After his spear spilled the river god’s ichor,
His arrow flew
And hit Stephen in the eye.
Blood rivers flooded down his face,
Falling into the river,
The river god mercifully granting him a swift death.

Greg though,
Was not so lucky;

Athena shoved him into the river,
Where the river god held him
Under the river's currents,
Choking that foolish enemy for claiming that
He could change the river's course
Like Heracles did to clean
The Aegean Stables a while back.
Oh, how the river god longed for this day:
The day he punished this dumbass for his arrogance,
Something the river god wanted to do
That day long ago
And would have had it not been for Zeus.

"Don't drown him," commanded the son of Cronus
That day,
"He needs to slay his father to liberate his kingdom—
"He is Victor's son,
"Destined to bring prosperity to the land
"That his father long denied."

"But Father Zeus," protested the river god,
Reluctantly sparing the foolish prince,
"This man has disgraced me.
"He claimed he can change the course of my river
"Like Heracles did to clean the Aegean Stables."

"Relax," assured the lightning god,
"You'll get to punish him soon enough."

As Zeus had promised,
The river god did indeed finally
Punished Greg
(Who was also the prince— now king— in question)
For his blasphemous claims;
And Athena, for being mocked by that mortal king,
Drove the enemy army mad
And caused them to chop his corpse.
Such the ways of the gods.

But what does this have to do with Selena?

There's a reason her sister drove away suitors,
For the widow will join Stephen in five years.

***

Is that so?
Am I to join my husband five years after his funeral?
Why did I follow Audrey to the temple,
Foolishly hearing my dreaded fate?

Alas, it would've been better to not have
Heard those words than
To be aware of my choices.

But,
I long for a domestic life—
Raising children and weaving through the day.
Whether I call them "husband" or "wife",
I don't know yet.
Either way,
I want many children,
Joyfully teaching my daughters crafts
While my spouse teaches their skills to our sons.

Even with two wives (or two husbands),
Someone has to take the husband role,
Although most spouses nowadays
Both take up work, regardless of wealth;
Some wealthy families are lucky
To have one housewife,
And I extremely rarely hear of couples
Wealthy enough to never work again.

For those reasons,
Apollo didn't say anything about a wife
Because it would be the same.
Husband or wife,
I join them five years after they die.

I have a chance to avoid it—
Remain a maiden,
Maybe take a vow of virginity

(Of course, many maidens are not virgins,
So I can still bear children as a maiden),
And forego a domestic life.

I don't want my children to be bastards,
Regardless if they have my blood or not;
Audrey's lucky for her legitimacy,
For I was born a bastard,
My mother's shame.
Audrey and I are full-blooded,
But my father laid with my mother
Three years before their wedding day.
Thank Hera that my parents wedded out of love
And not shame.

She hid me, a token of shame,
From her closed-minded parents;
May the lovely queen of Olympus,
Along with the Great Huntress,
Punish those who commit infanticide,
A wicked deed most grotesque.
Three years after their wedding day,
My mother's parents' rode with Charon
Across Styx.
Audrey was only one,
And I five years older.
They died in their ignorance to their firstborn,
Only knowing Audrey.

Still, my mother sees me with disgust,
Only teaching me to read
After Heather started educating me.
Meanwhile, Audrey was taught to read
By my mother before she was weaned,
Taught to read and write,
And further strengthened by Heather
When Audrey turned five.

Audrey's not blind to my mother's despise—
When my mother was teaching my little sister crafts,

Audrey wondered why she can't be taught by Heather
Like I was.
My mother replied,
"Heather teaches your sister better
"Than I would."
Knowing this, Audrey demanded that Heather teach
Her crafts instead,
A demand my mother loathed to uphold.

Audrey ran off to Heather,
Asking her to teach her crafts,
Claiming Heather can teach her better
Than our mother.
Thank the gods for giving Heather to us,
Teaching us to read and write along with our mother,
And teaching us important skills such as crafts.

Now, Heather is teaching Audrey the ways of Artemis,
How to slay the fearsome boars
And stalk the swift deer.
She's teaching her how to raise hounds
And the importance of praising Artemis for the hunt.
Hopefully, Audrey didn't do anything reckless;
However, she enjoys the ways of Artemis,
And I hope she gets to forever.

I prefer the quiet life,
Weaving clothes
And praying to Athena when I make cups and jars.
I desire children and cooking,
A home to keep.

But...
At what cost?
If I marry, I'm doomed.

Doomed to what?
To a happy life?
Then doomed, I'm not.
Hopefully, Hera blesses me with a blissful marriage,

No matter if it lasts a year or a hundred years.

Doomed to death?
Ridiculous.
I'm not a god—
My day will come, anyway.

Then what *am* I doomed to,
Since my fate does not imply
Wretched spouses or barren fields?
I'm only doomed if I live in misery,
Looking for daggers above my head
Instead of the stars around it.
It's wise to be cautious,
But paranoia is foolish.

It's settled:
I'll marry anyway.
Husband or wife will make no difference,
But I won't rush into it—
Hera once told a woman,
Too eager to marry,
That it's better to marry later and be happy
Than to marry young and be miserable.

***

Audrey.

Crap, she has a knife.

(*huff, huff*)
Audrey,
Where are you?

...

Didn't you have enough fun when you
Chased away all my suitors?
Why slander my husband?

...

Answer me.
Where are you Audrey?
You can't hide in camouflage, forever.
Oh, how you cower when you become prey.

Stay still,
Just like Heather taught you.
Predators and prey can hear you,
So just stay still...
When she leaves,
I'll run away.

...
Where are you, Audrey?
I just wanna talk to you.

(*clank, clank*)

!

(*gasp*)

...

...
Has Selena left...?
...
Good—
Now's my chance to flee.
There's no sign of—

Gotcha!

(*shrieks*)

Think you can run away, Audrey?
How does it feel to be the deer, Audrey?

Calm down, Selena—

You've hurt my family,
You've spread lies of Stephen;
I have every excuse to drive this blade
Into your poisonous heart.

I'm only doing what's best for you.

You think slashing my marriage
Into bleeding guts is *best* for me?

I'm saving you—
Don't you get it?

You'll meddle in my heart no more.

Dear gods, save me.

Stop!

...
Selena...
Her blade,

It's clean.

...

Go, Audrey.

Go before I change my mind.

***

Damn.
I should've killed her when I had the chance.

For what?
All she did was lie to the city
About your husband.
If she had tried to kill Stephen,
Then your rage might have been justified.

Athena,
I can't see you,
But I know you're talking to me.

And I made sure you didn't pollute my city.

But my lady,
You know slander kills.
What if I believed in Audrey's lies,
And I paint this knife in my husband's blood?
I would have slain an honest man.

And slaying your sister's any better?

Well, she deserves it
For all the misery she's caused.

She didn't kill anybody.
While she shouldn't have spread that rumor,
You shouldn't have came at her like that.

She never wanted me wedded, Athena.

You know why?

Hopefully,
Audrey's not saving me from my fate.

Your fate?

Yes:
Once Stephen dies,
I'll join him in Hades' realm five years after him.

I see.
You don't wished to be saved.

If I did,
I'd die a miserable maiden.

Odd.

Understand that I chose to fulfill my fate.

Most mortals are afraid of death,
But you seem undaunted by this thought.

It's foolish to fear a thing like that.

But what about living long?
Most mortals want that.

You know that striving for longevity is different
From striving for immortality.
People striving for longevity make sure
They stay on Earth as long as possible,
Making sure they make their time fulfilled.
They know they'll die one day.
When mortals strive for immortality,
They live in fear,
Dreading that inevitable day.
Their attempts end in failure.

I know—
I live forever, just like all the other gods.
I've seen mortals live in fear of crossing Styx,
And some who live recklessly,
Thinking they live forever like gods.

I just don't know why mortals fear the end
Instead of live.

I know.
I hope Audrey learns this.

Me too,
Though, she's afraid of *your* death.
Weird, for she slays beast with bows and arrows, right?

Huh?
"How does if feel to be the deer, Audrey?"
She's a huntress, no?

She is,
And has devoted herself to Artemis.

So, she has seen dying.
But, then again,
A beast's death is different from a sister's.

How so?

A beast means nothing to Audrey
But food, offerings, and warmth.
She doesn't feel love for the beast in the way
A sibling loves their other siblings.
A sister, however, she loves.
Remember that before you chase her
With a knife again.

Okay, my lady.
Thank you.

Anytime, Selena.

***

A Tombstone

Why did Athena stopped me that night?

Maybe it wasn't Audrey's fate
To fall by my hands that night.

Is that why Athena stopped me?

"And I made sure you didn't pollute my city."

Never mind.
Not everything the gods do when
Intervening on mortals' behalf
Is because of fate.

Is destiny beyond our control,
A series of strings pulling us to
A certain location in life?
Are we weak in cutting these pulleys,
A pulley so powerful and suffocating
Not even the immortal gods could slice free
The props of a predestined play?

Or is it and excuse?
Achilles would've still had glory
Had he drowned in the river
While avenging Patroclus,
But Athena and Poseidon rescued him,
Instead, letting him fall by an arrow to his heel.

Haven't you notice fate only exists
After an oracle,
Or when we can't explain the ineffable?
If the only thing they knew was that
They'll die one day, would they fulfilled
Their so-called "destiny?"

Fate then is a useless excuse to live in fear,

As ignorance to it makes us free.
A choice in fulfillment or defiance;
I've seen many evade their fates without trying.

They brought it on themselves
When their destiny comes—
Oedipus with the sphinx,
Jason helping Hera,
And Achilles taking up arms.

If fate's inevitable,
Then why bother dodging it?
If there's no chance in fighting it,
Why defy its choking grasp?
Did the priest got your fate wrong,
Or did you do the unthinkable?

Then...
What about *my* fate?
Can I get out of it?
Am I making this pot who'll carry the olive oil
It will soon rub onto my corpse for nothing?
Should I really take another husband,
Move on with my life?

If I'll really join my husband,
Then remarrying just pushes it later,
My destined ride into Hades.

Here, I mold my tombstone,
A long neck eulogy to my life,
Foolishly considering evading what will happen.
This pot will be needed
Whether my corpse's old or young.

What should it say?
What should others think of me
When they see what wept along with my family?

I could show Clarice's death,

Apollo killing her in labor,
Never to see Greg become a man
And liberate his kingdom from
The wicked Victor,
Another victim of a choice.

I can depict Achilles final moments of his life,
Heroically falling from an arrow
Piercing through such a vulnerable heel.
What a wise man to choose glory over longevity.

No—
I want the future to remember *me*;
This is my pot, not theirs.

So, future:
I'm Selena, named after the Moon—
I've joined my husband five years after him.
I brought my demise onto myself fifteen years ago,
A year before I wed.

My sister failed to kill my resolve,
Chasing off worthy suitors before my wedding day,
Then leading stupid men astray
Believing they'll soon win my hand after I widowed.

Fools are mortals who fear the end,
For you'll join me in these wealthy halls one day,
Mourning your ignorance.

Behold—
A scene best singing my resolve!

***

Audrey's Prayer to Athena

Glorious Athena,
Bright-eyed,
Wielder of the aegis
Who bears the dreaded Gorgon,
Protector of my niblings' homeland.
You wear your golden armor,
A radiating helmet over your wise head,
A spear standing post in your right hand,
And a shield in your left.

You're always on standby,
Ready to defend your cities from any foe
That comes your way,
Yet, willing to solve things with words first,
Always reminding us to solve conflicts
With diplomacy before war;
You're mortals greatest adviser.

Athena, skilled in the arts of war,
You've lead generals into battle,
Guiding them with your wisdom
And showing them the best way to victory.

With your father Zeus,
Wise and mighty is he,
You consult leaders in diplomacy
And laws protecting your people,
Giving us democracy.
I don't know for sure
How I figured this out,
But you're the one who saved me from
My sister's wrath,
Instilling restraint in her vengeful heart.

Thank you wise Athena
For saving me tonight.
Because of you quelling Selena's rage,

I can hunt wild beasts another day,
And sing praises to you and your fellow immortals.

Because of you,
You rescued her from polluting your city
And incurring your awful wrath,
Saving her from banishment,
Herself from pollution as well.

Thank you for protecting our cities,
Guiding us with your wisdom,
Giving us inventions and crafts
Bettering our glorious cities.

Thank you for leading our soldiers into battle,
Protecting them with your strategies
And watching over them as they come home
To their longing spouses and children,
Relived to see them alive.

Please, if it be your will,
Guide my sister out of her foolish desire.
Her stubbornness will only lead to doom,
Entering your wealthy uncle's home too soon.

My lady,
Please help me talk her out of widowhood,
And sparing herself from joining Stephen.
Help me save my sister from her fate.

***

As What as Penelope?

I don't get you, Audrey.
When you were a kid,
You dreaded the thought of my marriage;
Now, you want me married?

I'm doing what's best for you.

I don't *want* to remarry—
I've had fourteen wonderful years with Stephen.
He's my only husband in life and death.

You fool,
You're just like Penelope:
Refusing other suitors while waiting
For Odysseus to come home.

But Odysseus did come back home, idiot.

What if he never returned home?
Then her waiting would've been in vain.

But what if she did remarry,
Only for Odysseus to return,
Seeing his wife had betrayed him?

But you're not Penelope,
For Stephen will never return home.
Your stubbornness is pointless.

My faithfulness is justified.
Hera admires widows who marry once
More than widows who remarry
After their spouse's death.

But Hera also understands
That some people need to move on—
Pining for love killed Echo.

She won't get angry for widows
Remarrying after a few years;
They fulfilled their sacred vows.

What do you know about love and marriage, huh?
You forgone the domestic life as a girl,
Vowing virginity to Artemis.
You live chasing beasts through the woods,
Letting the thrill course though your bloodstream.
Not once do you care about romance and marriage.

I know enough that it's not worth dying for!

What make you think remaining faithful to Stephen
Is dying for love?

Because I just do.
Don't you think he would want you to move on?

He would,
But I don't—
I refuse to dishonor fourteen years
Out of your childish meddling.

But Selena,
I'm trying to *save* you.

From what?

From death.

You cannot save me from death.

You'll die this year if you don't remarry;
I'm saving you from a horrible fate.

I knew it.

...

Now do you understand

All the suitors I brought to you?
All those set ups I did?
I did it for you.

Who told you,
And how long have you known?

Since I was a girl,
When I chose the ways of Artemis.
Helena asked Apollo about your domestic life,
And said you'll join your husband
Five years after his funeral.

Is that why, for a year,
You chased every suitor away from our home?
Is that why, for five pointless years,
You've tried to wed me?

I'm trying to save you, Selena.

No you're not!

So you want to die, this year?

I rather join Stephen tomorrow
Than live the rest of my life as a miserable traitor.

You're the most selfish person ever, Selena.

You've been the selfish one all this time, Audrey:
Driving suitors away so I die a maiden,
Then slandering Stephen so I leave him.

But I—

Then you lead more suitors in vain
Just to keep me alive longer.

You don't understand, Selena—

I do too understand:
You just want to delay the inevitable.
Whether it's tomorrow or a hundred years from now,
I'm joining Hades in his realm eventually.
If you want immortal flesh and bones,
Your skin free from age,
Then go on that pointless quest yourself,
But I don't desire living forever.

I'm not asking you to live forever, dumbass.

Then why force me to marry again?
Why don't you just let me die
With fourteen happy years
With the most wonderful man in the world?
Why risk your sister who you love dearly
Into a longer life of misery?

...
Fine,
But you had your chance to avoid your fate.
Don't come crying to me if you change your mind—
No more will I save you.

...
Oh, Audrey,
I don't intend to change my mind.
Thank the gods you've changed yours.

***

A Shoulder to Cry On

Hey, Audrey.

...

Audrey?

...

Hey, Audrey,
What's wrong.

...

Not now, Ruby Red.

I can't stand seeing my friend in agony.

Nothing's wrong, Ruby Red.

Then why are your eyes
Releasing salty waterfalls?

None of your business, Ruby Red.

You don't use my name a million times
Unless something's wrong.

Go away!

...

No—
A good friend never leaves her friend in pain.
Abandoning friends is how
We get bodies suspending from trees
Like grapes euphorically dangling from its vine.

That's a disturbing image.

Sorry.

...
I don't know what will happen to Selena—
She seems so insistent on remaining widowed.

Well,
Some people don't want to move on.
You can't make mountains move, y'know.

But my sister—
She'll certainly die this year, now.

So?
Selena wasn't asking you to save her.
If she wanted to avoid her fate,
She would remain a maiden like you.

She also could've remarried.

But she didn't.

I was just trying to save her.

From what?
Death?

Her fate.

Hey,
I'm fated to cross Styx, too,
So why don't you save me from my fate?

I don't know your fate, Ruby Red.

I don't know it either
Except the ending.
Do I know when?
Do I know how?
No—

And I don't intend to.

...

Audrey,
I know you heard this a million times,
But it's better to enjoy living.
I don't want to know those things
Because it will keep me from happiness,
From singing to the gods
And of heroes.
I'd rather make the most of my life enjoying it
Than fearing that dreaded river.
Why don't you let Selena do the same?

...But I don't want her to die.

It's gonna be okay, Audrey.
You still have me for comfort.
Come on—
Stay at my place, tonight.

Thanks, Ruby Red.

...

Ruby Red?

Yeah?

Will you...
Tell me more about Greg?

Ha,
I thought you'd never ask.

***

The Ballad of Greg (Part Two)

***

AUTHOR'S NOTE: The story of Pete the Centaur is an in-universe apocryphal teaching the importance of sacred hospitality

***

As for the Snowy Beast,
Greg skinned the hide of its lifeless body,
A trophy of his heroics—
No, a thank-you gift for Athena.
I couldn't have done this without Athena,
Greg acknowledged,
The beast's hide belongs to her.

Surely, the hero's quest doesn't end there—
What happened next?
Greg entered into the forest
Where wild beasts roam.
The fearsome boars with their mighty tusk,
A beast, although short at the shoulder,
Is a farm-killer, digging up the vital wheat
And uprooting the orchard's saplings.
It dwells in the wilderness that Artemis loves,
Using its gifted razors to terrorize
Hunters and farmers alike.

Such persevering creatures are all too familiar
To the former farmer:
One day, his adoptive father bragged
That his fields bear more and healthy crops
Than Demeter, bringer of grain, will ever reap.
Oh, such a tale all to repeated,
Where mortals think they're gods;
The golden farmer then sent that evil boar
To ravage his rich fields.
Greg, only thirteen,
Did not believed in his adopted father's gloating,
And rushed to a priestess for abundant Demeter.

“I am Greg, a farmer’s son,” the future king announced.
He then rued, “My arrogant father has claimed
“His crops were better than Demeter,
“What foolishness.
“Now, his fields lay barren and ruined
“By a fearsome boar.
“This wrenches my heart so
“That my father insulted her like that.
“How do I appease Demeter,
“So his fields bear crops again?”

The priestess then asked Demeter about Greg’s pleas,
Then replied,
“Dear Greg,
“You must catch the boar in your mother’s land
“And give it to Demeter.
“Then, shall your father regain his abundant fields.”

Such a thing bugged him,
For the boar left his farm,
Leaving it barren ever since.

Now, back in the forest where sacred stags roam,
Greg came across a centaur named Pete,
A centaur known to steal in crafty ways.
He would offer his guests the finest wines,
And draw them the warmest baths.
He would offer guest beds
That remind one of a mother’s love.

However, when it’s time for travelers
To continue their adventure,
Pete would say,
“You’ve eaten my food,
“You’ve drunk my wine,
“You’ve bathed in my baths,
“And you’ve slept in my beds.
“Now, give me all your wealth on you.”
If the guest refused to pay?

Why, Pete would then send them outside
And shoot them with arrows,
Then skin their flesh,
Displaying it on his house as a reminder
For those who don't pay his fee.
Such violation of hospitality,
Sacred even to the gods.

Foolish Greg accepted Pete's offer,
But the joke's on Pete.
Why?
Hermes, protector of merchants and thieves alike,
Saw Pete's disgusting scheme,
And cursed him with failing joints
And failing eyes.
"I would kill you outright,"
The silver-tongued god mentioned,
"But you'll be slain by a prince
"Who have worked in the fields.
"Alas, death won't be the end of your suffering."

Once Greg entered Pete's home,
Hermes, in disguise as a moth,
Whispered to Greg,
"After you eaten his food and drank his wine,
"Challenge him to a footrace.
"Pete's joints are failing,
"So he's not very fast."

"But, he's a centaur," worried Greg,
"A creature as fast as a horse."

"Trust me."

After the prince have eaten Pete's food
And drank his wine,
Greg then challenged the centaur:
"I'm Greg, a prince on my way to save my kingdom.
"I was given to farmers as a baby
"And grew up growing crops.

“I challenge you to a footrace.”

“I refuse your challenge to a race,” Pete reasoned,
“For my joints are failing;
“But I *will* challenge you to discus throwing,
“Since my hands are more stubborn than the pain
“Intruding through them.”

Before Greg could refuse Pete’s challenge,
Hermes made sure he accepted it.
After all, the swift god knew
Pete would refuse a footrace.

What was at stake for this contest?
Greg, if he wins,
Gets to leave without paying Pete’s fee;
Pete, if he wins, would kill Greg on the spot,
Remembering Hermes’ words that day.

So, the murderous centaur went first.
He tossed the discus across the forest,
Between the towering pine trees—
Trees blessed with green even in snow—
And it landed in the grass.

Now, it was Greg’s turn.
He tossed it through the pines,
What distance it flew.
But, Hermes moved the discus
To ricochet off the sturdy oak among the pine,
The discus charging back like a soldier
Charging head-on into battle.
Instilled with Ares’ fury, the soldier lifts his spear
And points it to the enemy,
Protecting himself with a shield.
He them dashes into the foggy battlefield,
Filled with friends and foes alike,
Focused on the rival soldier,
With no thought on what he left behind at home.
The soldier then thrusts his spear

Into his enemy's soft flesh,
Through his guts
Causing it to spill the crimson blood,
And his enemy falls to the red ground,
On his way to the Wealthy Host.

Such the bloodthirsty discus would've claimed Greg
Had it not been for Hermes
Pushing him out of the way;
Instead, it struck Pete's head,
Crushing his wicked skull,
Blood gushing out of it.

"Smart guy, that Pete," Hermes mocked,
"He didn't try to avoid his fate."

And, as Hermes promised,
Death didn't end Pete's suffering.
In the depths of Tartarus, where the Titans
And other wretched souls dwell,
The centaur is now herding a flock a sheep,
Letting them graze the grass clean.
After the sheep had their fill,
They want to return home,
Home being inside some silver gates
With its doors open wide;
Just when Pete gets these sheep towards the gates,
Its doors slam shut before any sheep can enter.
The journey, of course,
Makes the sheep hungry again,
So Pete has to let them eat the grass again,
The grass having regrown;
The grass and the gates are about a sea-length apart.

As for Greg, he picked up the dreaded discus,
A discus that almost claimed him.

"Any thanks for me?" Hermes wondered.

"Thanks," the prince muttered,

“I’ll give you splendid gifts
“When I liberate my kingdom.”

***

A Dance

Ah yes,
Home sweet home.
You must be tired after today.

Thanks.

Are you hungry?

...
This fish isn't that bad.

I know it has no fancy spices
Like your sister's meals,
But it's the richest thing I have.

But you have your voice, Ruby Red,
Your songs to the gods.
You're the only woman allowed at comedies.
That I consider you wealthy.

I get paid well by patrons, too,
Never splurged my money,
Yet, I manage to say poor.

And yet, you manage to have wine
Tasting two-hundred years old.

My wine is not *that* fantastic.

How many grapes hanged themselves
To make this?

Audrey,
You said that was graphic.

Seriously,
Whoever made this wine

Must've been some of Dionysus' favorite people.

I got news for you, Audrey:
I helped make that wine.

You did?
How do you know you helped
Make *this* batch?

'Cause I got an amphora-full for free
In return for my service.
You see, while the men stomped on
Dionysus' sacred fruit,
I played the melody for their hypnotic dance,
Possessing all of us with musical ecstasy.
Oh, such a whimsical ritual,
Dancing and singing while making wine.
What is vicissitude and woe,
Suffering and heartache?
How do you get food for the next week,
Or pay for the home over your head?
These worries perish under merriment.

But these miseries still exist, Ruby Red—
You're just too drunk to remember.

Oh, they still exist, alright;
It's just that joy makes you forget them,
Even for a moment.
Besides, there are other ways to have fun
Than wine.
I know:
Let's dance,
That doesn't use wine.

Ruby Red,
It's too late to dance.

It's never too late to dance.
Here, I'll play the lyre,

And you'll prance around.

Unfortunately,
That's not all...

What?
You want me to sing?

No.

Well,
I won't sing for now.

...

Why aren't you dancing?

I...

C'mon, dance!

...

You call that dancing?
This is for Dionysus.

But we're not at his festivals.

Wrong—
Every time you let music possess your feet,
Including the music harmonizing in your head,
Your body moving with song,
You honor the merry Dionysus.
Whenever you laugh at iridescent comedies
Or weep at grim tragedies,
Immersing yourself in the characters' emotions,
You please the jovial wine god.

Is that so?

Whenever you sing to the gods and men,
Using the gift Apollo gave us poets,
Especially for no reason,
There you find the son of Seleme and mighty Zeus.
Even in the hunt,
Where the chase pulses through your veins, Audrey,
The victorious howls you sing to Artemis
After the beast falls to your arrows,
Bleeding the red river once sustaining its life,
There too is Dionysus,
Celebrating with his arrow-loving sister.

...

Dionysus' gift of joy
Knows not of festival and mundanity;
It makes no distinction between rich and poor.
Ecstasy is the panic before fury,
The merriment that executes despair.
Now let's sing and dance our worries away.

***

Her Will

Ruby Red,
If you got this letter,
Then you know what happened.
It be irresponsible to leave my children orphaned,
My husband's wealth to no one but the city.

Ruby Red,
I trust you with my children
And hope you guide them into adulthood,
Teaching them the ways of civil and domestic skills,
How to live on their own,
Something you and Audrey know well.
Tell Audrey your her niblings' new mother;
I'll leave both of you ignorant to my reason.

I know Stephen left his wealth to me
Until his son becomes a man,
Old enough to handle money;
But, since I hold the wealth,
And who knows what my son will desire,
It's only fair that I divide it accordingly:
One half will be left to Ruby Red,
My sister's best friend;
She will starve (if she was starving) no more.

The other half will go to my son,
In Ruby Red's care until he becomes a man.
My daughters hopefully will be
Wedded or working well by then.
Audrey never wanted a share in the leftover wealth,
For she's content with the wild ways of Artemis;
Because she never has to worry about money
Thanks to our mentor, Heather,
She desires no more wealth
(Audrey told this to me).

***

Audrey,

Don’t get mad at me for dying,
For this was inevitable.
Celebrate what I did in life;
Dwell not on my passing.
I hope I see you free of youth when I see you again.

***

Signed,
Selena

***

When I First Saw You

From the city, I hail,
From silver-tonged Hermes
And a shepherd's wife I descend;
I use my father's skills to sell items,
For which I'm grateful for his gift.

This route's not new to me—
I enter this unique land a few times a year,
Such a diverse market and buyers.

But you,
Lovely brown eyes
And hair golden wheat,
The loveliest woman my eyes behold.

On the river's banks, you gather water
For your family's clothing,
Your callously soft hands caressing these gentle robes.
Oh, those useful hands gifted by bright-eyed Athena,
They must've weaved those jovial cloths,
Your slender fingers guiding the thread
Through the sturdy loom,
Dancing along the limited pallet in your supply;
These simple rags are a royal gown on you.

My heart longs for you,
Even though I saw you for a moment.
Come,
Let me and you wed at once—
I promise you loyalty, my lovely queen.

***

A horse's footsteps called me away from my laundry,
And what gift they brought me:
A handsome merchant,
Curly blond,
No, light brown like tree bark,
Eyes a green field.

Your hands gave you away,
For your wealth was toiled for
Like farmers tending to their crops.

Oh, that strong body,
Deceptively soft,
Yet an unmovable mountain.

Your gentle smile—
It's genuine.
You don't use Hermes' gift to deceive
But persuade honestly without scaring buyers away.
If you feel the same way for me,
I'll lead you to my father at once;
Audrey won't get in my way, this time.

***

When I first saw you,
I knew Aphrodite and Eros made us meet,
And Hera blessed us together.
We knew from the start
Our hearts were meant together.

Thank you laughter-loving Aphrodite
For revealing our love meant to be;
Thank you Eros for striking us
With your powerful arrows
That make all but the Immune Virgins
Engulfed in love.

May Hera, who blesses marriage,
Come and bless our marriage.
May we remain faithful to each other,
And be bless with many children.
May we be together forever.

***

Postlude: Faithfulness

Selena—
Resolved to her fate for fifteen years.
I wished she was ignorant to those words
For fifteen years instead.

A year before her wedding day,
She came to me,
The goddess of marriage,
Intent on a prayer.
Or so I thought.

"Millie, great priestess of Hera,
"Who blesses marriages;
"I've heard my doom.
"I accepted it,
"And I intend to follow through."

Millie asked, "But why?
"Does it involve Hera?"

"It does now."

Foolish Selena,
Why did you tell *me* of your fate,
Then sworn by me to keep to it?
I can't say whether remarriage would've saved you
Or lead you to where you are anyway.

Mortals dread death,
Seeking ways to avoid crossing Styx.
We gods who live forever sympathize with your fear,
But— aside from the gods who greet the dead—
We don't understand why you fear a common fate.

Maybe you're afraid of what you'll leave behind,
Or are you afraid of what you haven't done?
Are you afraid of what's next,

Although you know the answer?

Maybe you're afraid of leaving your love ones behind,
Alone without you,
Or are you afraid of causing them pain?

Oh, Selena, named after the Moon—
You're faith to Stephen lives even after death,
Choosing him over any suitor.
You defied your sister's shield
And embraced your desires head-on.

If only some mortals were as faithful as you in life,
For even gods can be infidel to their love ones.
Most mortals are loyal to their spouses,
Value fidelity that I too hold dear,
But after their spouse enter that wealthy home,
Some choose to move on and take another;
They have fulfilled their vows to me and each other.

But is faithfulness to a spouse worthy of your actions?
Stephen would want to see you old with years,
Your golden hair painted white like flour,
Teaching your daughters crafts
And seeing your son grow to become a man—
Even if it means having another spouse.

Since I couldn't save you from joining Stephen,
I've could've saved you from how you joined him,
You self-fulfilling fool.

You think your death would mean nothing to me,
But even the gods mourn the deaths
Of devoted mortals;
We love them even though they can't live forever,
And we can't make *every* mortal we love immortal.

Selena:
You didn't deserve this fate,
Nor did you deserve to complete it yourself.

Stubborn as you are,
You vowed to me,
How I dreaded that oath.

But, I admire your faithfulness,
Your devotion to Stephen
Even when Audrey slandered him so.
Stephen too was faithful in return,
No sense in letting you go away.

Since I can't revive you,
I shall change your mortal flesh
Into a water lily,
And blessed be those who wed with your new form
In full bloom.

***